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China Watchers Peer Through a Fog

It, as Churchill observed, Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, mainland China is a fortune cookie wrapped in an egg roll inside a bowl of fried rice.

Western China watchers are not only in the dark about what is going to happen in Peking, they often don't even know what has already happened there. A measure of our experts' befuddlement is the fact that they didn't learn of Hua Guofeng's appointment as acting premier until weeks after the event—and then only by reading about it in a Hong Kong newspaper.

"According to a Western press report, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said today that Public Security Minister Hua Guofeng has been appointed 'acting premier,'" a U.S. intelligence report states. This intelligence scoop was classified "Top Secret," naturally.

Trying to keep track of fluctuations in what intelligence insiders jokingly call the "Peking Order" is a baffling and frustrating task. Although it sounds like an attempt to handicap a horse race, trying to unravel the complexities of Chinese politics is a deadly serious exercise. The direction taken by the most populous nation on earth can be of crucial importance to the rest of the world, and any signposts pointing out that direction cannot be ignored by our policy makers.

The ups and downs of recent months—abrupt reversals of economic and ideological policies—have convinced

the intelligence community that China is experiencing one of the most volatile periods in its turbulent 30-year history. In the dog-eat-dog tradition of Communist regimes, someone must be saddled with blame for the "failure" of policies that have now been declared mistaken. But intelligence sources told our associate Tom Rosenstiel they still haven't figured out who will be the scapegoat this time around.

Our experts think it's possible that current kingpin Deng Xiaoping—remembered by most Americans as the genial little man in the big white cowboy hat—will lose some of his power in the current shakeup. This will be nothing new for Deng, described by one intelligence source as "acerbic, hard-driving and undiplomatic." He already has been purged twice and rehabilitated twice.

The keenest speculation centers on Hua, whose rise to power astonished the Western experts. One secret analysis frankly called Hua's appointment in 1976 as acting premier a "revelation." According to an intelligence rundown the year before, Hua was considered a possibility for top leadership only "over the longer term," because he had come to Peking from the hinterlands only a year earlier.

American China watchers, who had expected Deng to be named premier, quickly developed 20-20 hindsight after Hua's appointment. "In retrospect," says another secret CIA report,

"it is obvious that Deng's ascension to power was opposed at every step by the left . . . Indeed, in some respects Hua Guofeng would be a better man for the premiership than Deng. Next to Deng, in fact, Hua is the most logical candidate for the job."

Hua's greatest asset is considered to be his ability to avoid identification with any one faction in the deadly wars of Chinese communist politics. While this deprives him of a power base, this weakness is believed to be offset by his acceptability to all factions as a compromise leader.

Whether Hua's tightrope-walking skill will get him through the current crisis is not at all clear to our intelligence experts. But then, it's probably not clear to the Chinese leadership either.